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SWIMMIN'



"The Pegasus of Woodstock stands
forever waiting at the market place."

"What, are you a poet?"

"'Ardly that, young sir, 'ardly that!" said he, rubbing his chin.
"No, 'ardly a poet, p'r'aps, but thereabouts. My verses rhyme
and go wi' a swing, which is summat arter all, ain't it?"

Perigrine's Progress, by Jeffery Farnol



"Down river from the 'lower bridge'—say fifty rods
or less
Was the swimmin' place we called 'Dace Hole'—the
same as now, I guess."

GOIN' SWIMMIN'

DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY

KARL A. PEMBER



WOODSTOCK VERMONT

1892-1922

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Eusebio
1929

Gift
to the Little Company
Jan. 10, 1929.

WHY IT'S DONE

I mean, why these humble verses of the most modest of our modern poets appear again after they have once exposed themselves in the pages of the Vermont Standard. The reason is that I liked the stuff; perhaps chiefly because I so much enjoyed the memories they called up of my own goin' swimmin' in days far back of '92, and called for their reappearance.

There was another reason. I wished for a chance to prove to my native friends that I can do this sort of thing far better than the Author of These Verses. The proof lies in these two stanzas; which I wrote myself:

*I also can remember quite as well as Karl A. Pember
The glories of the swimmin' holes of days of long ago.
And I ask your kind attention while in verse I briefly mention
Things older and far better than that youth K. P. can know.*

*For example, prophylactics, certain sure and easy tactics
To prevent that awful seizure by the cramp in water cold;
And the funny ceremonies, enforced by all their cronies,
On boys who got their clothes off last—but some things can't be told!*

Is it not good stuff? I will dare to let the patient reader answer. Having exalted my horn I hasten to be modest, according to my nature, and to say that I wrote these stirring lines right after K. P.'s first section appeared; that I intended to outdo K. P. and was sure I could; that it was my purpose to cover the ground thoroughly, omitting nothing; that inspiration failed me straightway; that while I was spending hours counting out new and awful lines and rhymes on my fingers (the only way I knew to get the meter right) K. P. appeared again in the Standard; and then I saw at once that while mine was the loftier flight, his was the more sustained and that his genius was putting fire to my rubbish heap of detail.

In conclusion: the Pegasus of Woodstock stands forever waiting at the market place; and all who will may mount and try to fly. Two natural born cloud piercers have shown how it is done.

J. C. D.

Newark N. J. October 1922

GOIN' SWIMMIN'

*"Backward, turn backward,
O Time in your flight!
Make me a boy again,
Just for tonight."*

I

In story books and magazines we very often see
About the good old swimmin' hole there always
used to be;
Though most of us have visions—a dim and hazy
crop
From the second-hand department of Memory's
dusty shop—
And feel a thrill of pleasure while calling it to mind,
Still, wouldn't that "ole swimmin' hole" be rather
hard to find?
Before we all forget it and lose the chance to see,
I want to tell you young folks just where it used
to be
And how we used to get there and what we used
to do
When the fellers went in swimmin' back in eighteen
ninety-two.
There was more than one "ole swimmin' hole," like
graded schools you know,
Where little chaps and middle-sized and bigger
boys could go:
Our play was not yet organized—we hadn't any
rights,
And we didn't use the "Mill Pond" 'cause "you
had to put on tights";

"The Branch" was quite available and so was old
 "Dace Hole,"
And "The Bend" a place to thrill with joy most
 any swimmer's soul.
The girls could go in wadin' by themselves or with
 their Mas
But swimmin' then was done by just us boys—with-
 out our Pas,
And we didn't have to ask our folks to buy us bath-
 in' togs,
We just went in as naturally and bare as any frogs.

II

"The Branch" was where the little fellers mostly
 used to go
(And that was part of what we call the Kedron
 now, you know)
Without a house to bother us on either side the
 brook
From Cross Street Bridge to Townsend's Farm, and
 people couldn't look
Nor interfere with all the fun we had in that
 small pool
That was thickly populated most the time we
 weren't in school.
A narrow well-trod pathlet turned and twisted
 'long the crest
Of the bank just eastward of the stream to where
 we all undressed,
And led us to a clear cold pool 'bout twenty-two
 feet wide
And thirty long, with sandy bottom sloping from
 the side;

The depth was quite conveniently "just up to here
on me"
And the whole presided over by a leaning willow
tree.

III

The Cross Street Bridge was wooden then and led
to Tink Day's shop,
And all was peaceful out beyond—hay was the
only crop—
And Townsend's Farm has now become the Country
Club to you
And Golf and Maple Streets and all have grown
since ninety-two.
To find the spot exactly where this small pool used
to be
Take forty paces southward from the present fourth
hole tee,
And though it won't look occupied just as it used
to there
With the ground around the edges all matted down
and bare,
Still you'll have seen an humble spot once known to
boyish fame
Quite worthy of this monument to memory—just
the same.
Down river from the "lower bridge"—say fifty rods
or less
Was the swimmin' place we called "Dace Hole"—
the same as now, I guess,
Behind the Tann'ry buildings where the South
Branch empties in
Was a first rate pool 'bout shoulder deep, but ston-
ier than sin,

And though perhaps you'll know the place beyond
the slightest doubt,
It's back of Mass's greenhouse and the saw mill
(just sold out):
I took my first few swimmin' strokes right there
in that same pool,
And a prouder kid you never saw inside or out of
school.
It wasn't the most sanitary place to swim 'twould
seem
For the outlet from the Tann'ry reached the river
just upstream,
And chance encounters now and then with horns
and bits of hide
Enlivened the engagements and enhanced the
gentle tide:
This place was very popular with all us kids because
'Twas a grade above "The Branch" hole and the
handiest place there was,
And 'twas plenty far away enough from folks a-
passing by
To save offence to e'en the passing tribute of an eye;
For mind you, as I said before, we weren't a lot of
prudes,
And fellers that wore "swimmin' trunks" were
classified as dudes.

IV

Now let me just assure you that the very best of all
By way of good old swimmin' holes that I can now
recall
Was "The Bend"—Ah, what a place that was to
please the genus "boy"
And fill his young aquatic soul with seven kinds of
joy:

"The Bend", compared to all the other swimmin'
holes around
About the same as College does to Prep Schools, I
have found;
And after graduation from "The Branch" and "Old
Dace Hole"
The ultimate achievement of "The Bend" might
thrill your soul.
Where was "The Bend" you'd like to know?—Let's
see if I can tell,
It seems as if I might because I used to know it
well:
You went down to the depot and followed 'long the
track
And scrambled down th' embankment—on your
feet or on your back—
Then followed on by Washburn's Brook clear to
the river bank
Along a narrow little path through June grass thick
and rank,
Then down along the riverside beyond the upper
end
Of a row of ancient willows till at last you reach-
ed—"The Bend";
You ducked between two willow stumps and there
along the shore
Were most commodious quarters for a dozen boys
or more.

V

The ground all 'round about the place was very
smoothly trod,
The work of many pairs of feet a-pattering on the
sod;

The willows made a perfect screen from grown-ups,
I suppose,
And also furnished hanging space for all the fellers' clothes;
The bank was high, the water deep and clear and fine and warm,
And the plunge therein was dandy—if it wasn't in good form;
The pool was big and plenty deep for all the tricks we knew
From soundin', treadin' water, and all the program through
To swimmin' like a frog and under water, on your back,
And divin' in so many ways I really can't keep track.
But "The Bend" can never more be used for divers swimmin' joys
By the present day contingent of the brotherhood of boys,
For the sewer of the village now pollutes this fabled stream
And the dump is just above it—so there's only mem'ries dream
To preserve the old time glory of the things we used to do,
And note the old traditions of the boys of ninety-two.

VI

I wonder if they're doing now the very same old stunts
We used to do in ninety-two, when we were little runts,—

Most likely not,—they're probably much more efficient now
Than in the days I speak of when we were learning how:
The tall grass tied across the path to trip the hurrying tots,
The arms and legs of shirts and drawers tied up in double knots,
And after you'd persuaded some new kid to duck his head
And try to hear some crazy thing upon the river bed
To whack two stones together underneath the surface blue—
He'd sure believe he'd heard it and his head was busted too;
And divin' in on top a kid you'd just shoved off the bank,
The rising moon—the light-house—and many another prank,
All ending up a-hurrying to get your cap on first
And yelling "King" and all the rest down to the very worst:—
Without a doubt the kids now'days have quite another lot;
The trouble is there's nobody to tell us what is what.
And doubtless too its just as hard to get your hair all dry
Before you see your mother when you've "been in"
on the sly.

VII

Say—any of you fellers know the old time swimmin' sign?
A signal of the brotherhood the grown-ups couldn't "jine";

Your first two fingers spread apart and held up
in the air
Meant "the gang is goin' swimmin'—you're invited
to be there."
'Twas a summons unmistakable that any boy would
know
And join the aggregation if his folks would let him
go.
Gee whiz! but don't I wish that there was some-
thing I could do
To roll the years way back again to eighteen nine-
ty-two,
And through the eyes of boyhood as the youthful
vision clears
To get a glimpse of fellows that I haven't seen for
years,
And with the swimmin' signal a joyous message
send
To all the boys I used to know to meet me at
"The Bend".

And furthermore . . .

VIII

Of course we all have heard about the game of "Three-ole-cat",

Its elements consisting of us boys, a ball and bat.

Well—we boys played it hereabouts in eighteen-ninety-two,
But we called it by a better name, and, what is surely true,
A shorter, quicker, cleaner one—we always called it "Scrub",
Just why I cannot tell you—tho' I wish you'd tell me, bub.
But never mind, "What's in a name", "The Play's the Thing",

you know,

And the modus operandi is the same where'er you go.

Sometimes when five or six of us were "hangin' 'round",
that's all,

From some mysterious sources would appear a bat and ball;
"Scrub One! !" would yell the first to think, and then, "Scrub
Two! !"—"Three! !"—"Four! !",

And on—a number to a boy until there were no more;
Then, after hot adjustments of who'd yelled each number first
By means of fists and arguments, for better or for worst,
"Scrub One" would be first batter—tho' sometimes there'd
be two—

Then catcher, pitcher, basemen, in the order that they drew,
With no limit to the fielders but the number of the boys
That happened to be present to enjoy the fun and noise.

The game progressed—you bet it did!—progression was its
yield;

When a kid got "out" he had to take the last place in the field
And everybody moved up one—each had his little chance
To pitch and catch and everything and 'round the bases dance.
And that's the very reason why I liked the game of "Scrub",
For as a base ball player I ranked as just a "dub",

And I heard the cry, "Let's choose up sides!" with very keen
regret,

Which happened when the crowd increased beyond the limit
set;

For well I knew the fellers that could play the game first rate
Would get the good positions, while me they'd relegate
To the harmless occupation of a passive, poor "right field",
And a "Hey! let Smithy bat for you!",—Alas! my fate was
sealed.

We didn't have a play-ground the same as you boys do,
'Cept just around the school-house, back in eighteen ninety-
two,

The folks were pretty good to us and let us use the street,
But when we got too thick or broke a window, we'd retreat
To a place behind the Christian Church or back of Jones's
Block,

Or Hazen's lot, or Tribou Park or—Say! Now here's a shock!—
When driven to extremities—the whole world out of tune—
I've seen some ripping ball games on a Sunday afternoon
In the small and peaceful valley just behind our old Mount
Feg;

But I'd hate to have you tell 'em that I told you. Don't I beg!

IX

The carnivals and winter sports of nineteen twenty-two
Are a wonderful improvement o'er what daddy used to do.
Now skiis are quite magnificent—you buy 'em at the store
All varnished up and painted in a hundred styles or more;
But in the early nineties if you yearned to slide on skiis
You procured two worthless barrel staves and nailed two
straps on these,

And instead of what's referred to as a "ski-bob", so they say,
We made a dandy "jumper" in a very simple way,

By nailing to a barrel-stave a stick of stove-wood small
And then across the top of that a board—and that was all.
These didn't show much speed or class, nor boasted trophies
 won,
But provided entertainment and heaps and heaps of fun,
When the snow was soft before the paths were beaten for our
 sleds
And the traverses and double-runners kept us from our beds
Those moonlight nights on Hartland Hill (where you could
 slide a mile),
On Jaquith's and on Watkins' and on College for a while,
And now and then on Billings', and the best of all the slides—
Old Church Hill with its bumpers and the legendary rides
Of fellers that had slid clear down to High Street—honest fact,
When the hill was glare, the ruts just right, and the giant
 Town-sleds packed.
We skated joyfully about on places now denied;
The "Oil Pond" back of Sayward's dam so greatly raised the
 tide
That we could skate way up the Branch, and many a little rink
Dotted the meadows on each side where now you'd scarcely
 think
Such things could possibly have been in eighteen ninety-two;
But I assure you just the same that they are very true.
Late in the Fall the Mill Pond furnished skating very nice,
(I've been 'most up to Johnson's dam on good old thin black
 ice),
Pogue Hole and Perry's Eddies helped our jolly skating days
And cheerful nights attended by a bon-fire's ruddy blaze.
And that reminds me of the times we had to stay inside
All gathered 'round the roaring stoves during the eventide.
There weren't so many furnaces around here then as now
And more of us burned wood than coal you'll certainly allow.
Why—four-foot wood was five a cord delivered in your yard
And you bucked it up yourself, by gum, and thought it mighty
 hard.

But anyway, what fun we had a-swapping postage stamps
To put in our collections, beside the old oil lamps,
And selling 'em from "proval sheets" and hunting through old
chests,

They do it now without a doubt—it's fun that stands the tests.
Comparing Tewk's collection with Hal's, or maybe mine;
And this applies to birds' eggs and tobacco tags so fine
That we all collected; some of us e'en cigarette cards chose
Obtained from Sweet Cap smokers—sure, you just ask Dad,
he knows.

There were coin collections, wood collections, almost every-
thing

Collectable—obtainable—a-trundling home we'd bring,
"Till, I suppose, the patience of our parents was worn out
By the various collections that we couldn't go without.
Of course we'd go to parties where we'd have a lot of fun
But generally speaking we were glad when they were done,
While Dancing Schools and Parties that were given by the girls
We wished that we could relegate to boys that still wore curls.
But, speaking of society and such negotiables
Say! didn't we have fun though at the "Congo" Sociables!

X

'Most all the games we used to play are 'bout the same as now,
The underlying principles aren't different anyhow;
The game of "Henary" has its counterpart today
Though the details may be handled in a slightly altered way,
"Hi-Spy" and "Hide and Coop" and "Hide and Seek" are all
the same

When played today or yesterday by whatsoever name;
Considerable excitement would attend "Duck-on-a-Rock"
And "Marbles"—"big" and Little Ring", "Plain", "Pug" and
"Chase" and "Clock";

There was "Tag" of all descriptions, "Plain", "Wood" and
"Cross" and "Squat"

And "Hare and Hounds" and "Prisoner's Base" we used to
play a lot;

The noble game of "Leap-Frog" was indulged in by the cubs
(A higher form was called the short and ugly name of
"Dubs"),

"Follow-Your-Leader", "Fox and Geese", a hundred others too
All helped to pass the time away in eighteen ninety two.

Now, most of these required a most careful "counting out"

To hit upon the first one to be "it" beyond a doubt,

Using cabalistic phrases, "Eeny meeny mony my"

Close followed by the awful, "Paskalainy bony stry",

And then one stated, "Arrago", and "Jarrago" came next

And "out goes you" or "Y-O-U" according to the text

Or the fixed determination to evade the god of chance

By the one who did the counting with his index-finger lance

And to keep the final syllable from pointing straight at him

And causing him to be "it" first instead of me or Jim.

So, what I want to know is whence this incantation came

So powerful that it could change the gender and the name

Of the boy its spell was cast upon by transformation fit

From a husky male Tom, George or Dick to just a neuter "it".

L'ENVOI

1922

I sit and write these jingly lines and visions come and go
Of the fellows and the places and the times I used to know.
My wife sits by the table and the children play right near
And the past and present pictures are most wonderfully dear.
The boys are mostly scattered from the scenes of ninety-two
But I have been a stay-at-home, and all that I can do
Is to urge a retrospection of our early boyhood days—
And as I dream my eyes get sort of covered with a haze—
“The Missus” asks the cause of my involuntary sighs
By a slight interrogation from the dearest pair of eyes
That ever yielded gladness to a man of forty-plus
With the maximum of comfort and the minimum of fuss;
A moment’s lift of tousle-heads of kiddies on the floor
And the past and present mingle as they never did before.
No, I wouldn’t change the old days nor the present ones, I
 ween,
But if I could I’d change some roads I’ve traveled in between.
It’s just as natural as can be for me to ask for you
The age-old prayer of fathers with the hope it may come true,
God grant you smoother passage through the intervening years
Than I have had, my children, and with more of smiles than
 tears,
As you tread the hopeful pathway from the land of now to
 then,
And as good a start and finish as I’ve had thus far. Amen.

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